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# "Beyond the Horizon": Disconnections in Indonesian War of Independence

Peter Romijn\*

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**Abstract:** »*Hinter dem Horizont: Entkopplungen im indonesischen Unabhängigkeitskrieg*«. This article examines the transformative experiences of Dutch soldiers as they were transported overseas to fight in the Indonesian War of Independence, 1945-1949. It argues that both the onward and the homeward voyages were an essential part of preparing the soldiers for participation in an extremely violent conflict for an undefined period of time in a world they did not know. On their return journey, they were supposed to cope with fresh memories of the war they had participated in while at the same time, after two years or more, had to prepare to re-integrate into civilian life. In this respect, the experiences of the soldiers were connected to those of the European and Eurasian returnees, refugees, and postcolonial migrants transported to the metropole. The article describes the transformative collective experiences of the sea voyages lasting five to six weeks. It argues that these travels were intended, and functioned, to shape group identities. Aboard the ships, the collective outlooks were prepared in the framework of the mobilization of bodies and minds for the colonial war, and of demobilization after the war had been lost.

**Keywords:** Troop transports, the Netherlands, Indonesia, decolonization, memory culture., Indonesian war of independence, soldiers.

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## 1. Soldiers on the Move Across the Globe

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Sergeant Lodewijk Stegman's troopship is approaching the Dutch coast as he realizes that he does not wish to go "home" at all. It is 1950 and the Dutch expeditionary force is returning from the Indonesian War of Independence. Five long years of bloody conflict have compelled the Dutch government to

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I gratefully acknowledge the use of two unpublished BA-Theses written by students under my supervision at the History Department of the University of Amsterdam: Mark Bergsma, 2010: *Terug naar Holland: De terugtocht van de Nederlandse repatrianten vanuit Indië in de periode 1945-1949* ["Returning to Holland: the return of Dutch of Dutch repatriants from the East Indies, 1945-1950"]; and Hans Meurs, 2010: *Het vervoer van Nederlandse troepen naar/van Nederlands-Indië: Belevissen van militairen en het optreden van de militaire leiding tijdens de zeereis*. ["The transport of Dutch troops to and from the East Indies: adventures of the soldiers and the behavior of the military leadership during the sea-voyage].

accept the independence of their former colony – the former Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia. Stegman, the protagonist in Willem Frederik Hermans's 1951 novel *Ik heb altijd gelijk* (I am always right), aggressively voices his frustration about the lost war. He feels like a pawn in the game of visionless and cowardly politicians and hates the idea of returning to a parochial Dutch society. His solution is trying to bribe an officer of the Italian ship that is chartered by the Dutch government to bring the soldiers home:

I need to stay aboard, as an ordinary seaman, or a deckhand. I will do any job, any... clean the latrines all day. Everything, on condition that he could stay on the ship, sail away, probably to South America. Any country would be fine – or never leave ship again. (Hermans [1951] 1979, 9)

Paradoxically, as his voyage is coming to an end after long years of national service, Stegman's sense of being uprooted comes to a violent climax when coming home. His story is fictional, but nevertheless reflects the experience of 130,000 Dutch soldiers, conscripts, volunteers, and other professional military personnel returning from the lost war in Indonesia. This war belonged to the global sequel of World War II, in which colonial ties were violently challenged and severed (Buettner 2016; Romijn 2017). The name of the ship would remain with them as part of their identity: "I sailed off on *Zuiderkruis*" would, among those involved, count as a significant statement (Legendijk 1991).<sup>1</sup> The returning Dutch soldiers had participated in an extremely violent war and many of them had engaged in, witnessed, or been subjected to atrocities. They were generally dissatisfied and frustrated about their years of service and the lost war. At the same time, they had reason to be concerned about their prospects for resuming civilian life, starting families and a career.

The transport of troops to and from the Dutch East Indies was part of the desperate Dutch effort to restore colonial rule. These men were among the countless "people on the move" in the aftermath of World War II. In the aftermath of Japan's surrender, more than 100,000 former Dutch civilians were evacuated to the Netherlands. At the same time, even more troops, as well as administrators and business people, were taking the reverse route. Yet contrary to the evacuees, the soldiers were not fleeing war and disruption, but were instead sent by the Dutch state to forcibly suppress Indonesia's bid for independence. This made these Dutch soldiers a specific category of migrants: they were instruments of colonial power. The soldiers were sent overseas to suppress the insurrection of the colonial subjects, and thus maintain the existing power relations. They went to discipline and punish, but were also subjected to a regime of discipline themselves. The large majority of the Dutch soldiers – some 100,000 – were conscripts called up for national service from mid-1946

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<sup>1</sup> <[www.boordgeld.nl](http://www.boordgeld.nl)> (accessed September 5, 2019).

onwards. Before their arrival, between 1945 and 1946, these conscripts were preceded by volunteers and professional military personnel (Romijn 2014, 94).

Nevertheless, they also shared experiences with emigrants, refugees, and displaced persons (DPs) moving via transcontinental shipping routes. For the troops, this onward travel was filled with excitement and high expectations. Like the colonial settlers before them, they were encouraged to see themselves as part of the “*mission civilisatrice*” (“civilizing mission”) of the Dutch Empire. However, returning after a failed mission and a lost war, the soldiers shared the same frustrations and anxieties as those of the civilians on the move: disillusion about the end of empire; the prospect of a crude reception in the metropole; and enormous difficulties finding a new place of their own – housing, employment, etc. For civilians and for soldiers alike, ships became a temporary microcosm in which anxieties about unknown worlds were shaped. As such, transport became a catalyst for memories and expectations. For this reason, the name of the ship would remain with them as part of their identity.

The history of post-colonial migration communities is discussed in a growing body of scholarship, whereas returning soldiers have generally spoken for themselves within the memory culture of the demobilized veteran community (Scagliola 2002; Oostindie 2010, 2015). Obviously, the members of the Dutch expeditionary forces were not refugees or DPs in the sense of contemporary definitions by the International Refugee Organization.<sup>2</sup> These men and (albeit fewer) women were travelling with a purpose defined by their own state and were organized in a military manner. Some were eager to go and did so as volunteers, while others were compelled.

In this article, I discuss the history of the troops’ onward and homeward journeys within the context of the end of Dutch rule in Indonesia, and argue that the voyages and the secluded community of the ship were essential for preparing the soldiers for participation in an extremely violent armed conflict and, on their way back, for coping with the fresh memories of the war and the loss of innocence (Limpach 2014; Romijn 2014). The colonial context of the voyages was omnipresent, both on the onward voyage and, even as the colonial effort was coming to an end, when sailing home. Of the latter, the terminology “return journey,” or “repatriation,” would only apply to those soldiers from the metropole, however, members of the colonial army in the former Dutch East Indies also became part of this exodus. They were removed from their homes and transported into a new, unknown world, in which they would have to integrate from scratch (Ellemers and Vaillant 1985).

I argue that in the context of decolonization in particular, the voyages can be seen as prolonged rites of passage, urging those concerned to reconsider their view of the world, their own role in it, and their identity as a whole. How did

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<sup>2</sup> IRO; <[www.loc.gov/law](http://www.loc.gov/law)> (accessed September 5, 2019).

the soldiers shape and adjust their “mental map” while underway? This question pertains to the military in a particular way. Their assignment is essentially political: to exercise power through the force of arms. In the military context, the soldiers’ expectations, experiences, and outlooks are collectivized and disciplined. Soldiers are told by their superiors how to interpret the world in which they are being deployed. On the ships, they were shown films and given lectures to familiarize them with the idea that they themselves would now become part of a long line of colonial exploits.

As Karl Schlögel (2016) argues, “Mental maps are a world, as it were, one each of us carries within him- or herself, our inventory and supply of images” (199). Thus, mental maps do not relate to a single, visibly defined space, but to points of view, modes of perception, and forms of experience. Such orientations are founded on the broader social, educational, and political framework in which people live. Living with a group of peers in the confinement of the ship may have worked to establish and reconfirm these outlooks. It served as a transitional space, preparing the soldiers for the role they were supposed to play, and upon which they were supposed to reflect along the path thought fit for them: as soldiers on the outward journey first and later, homeward bound again, as disciplined civilians. Thus, I argue, “being on the move” shaped their identities, first as soldiers, and later on as veterans.

I will discuss this process as part of the global migrations that occurred in the aftermath of World War II – a world that, in many places, would remain in a state of deep turmoil. At first sight, migration may seem an awkward term in this respect. However, in a colonial and post-colonial context, these large-scale movements fit into existing colonial practices and certainly were part of a global effort to maintain existing international power structures (Rass and Wolff 2018, 44). For those involved, being transported to the other side of the world as soldiers included the same elements of uncertainty as for migrants, not least, regarding the duration of their deployment (in many cases at least two or three years) and the prospects for future life and livelihood.

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## 2. Colonial Crossings

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For generations of Dutch citizens, “sailing east” was a source of national pride embedded in popular histories, evoking expectations of adventure, heroism, and riches for the taking. Each ship carrying passengers to the Dutch East Indies was seen as representing the nation’s colonial effort and adding to a collective accomplishment. Since the opening of the Suez Canal, shipping routes to the Dutch East Indies connected to a rapidly expanding network of internal shipping lines, modern roads, and railroads in the colony. This infrastructure supported military operations, administrative organization, and business expansion. Entrepreneurs, technical experts, high-ranking civil servants, and officers

traveled to the Dutch East Indies in luxury. The five-week voyage prepared colonial migrants for entering an unknown world with a radically different social setting, in terms of race, gender, and hierarchy (Legêne 2010, 7-31).

Soldiers sent overseas occupied a rather low position in this hierarchy. Their low position in the social stratification in the European part of colonial society was even accentuated during the voyage (Yska 2015, 3). The *Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger* (KNIL; Royal Netherlands East Indies Army), like other colonial armies, consisted of both Dutch and, in the lower ranks, indigenous soldiers. Dutch enlisted recruits were shipped to the Dutch East Indies after receiving basic training. The government chartered space in ships that were also in use for transporting Indonesian and Malay pilgrims to Mecca. The accommodation for the soldiers resembled the barracks at home: simple, communal sleeping quarters on the lower decks.<sup>3</sup>

In March 1942, the Dutch colonial army proved no match for the Japanese invaders and was forced to surrender. As Japan occupied the Dutch East Indies, its military rulers placed captured European soldiers in prisoner-of-war camps all over occupied Asia and even in Japan. More than 40,000 KNIL personnel were subjected to exhausting forced labor, for example on the Burma Railway, and one fifth of them did not survive. Some 100,000 Dutch civilians were interned as well, and as a result of the harsh regime and the increasing lack of food and medication, almost 17,000 civil internees died. The Indonesian population as a whole also suffered gravely: in Java alone, of the 50 million inhabitants, an estimated 2.5 million perished.<sup>4</sup>

On August 15, 1945, after an occupation that had lasted more than three years, the Japanese Empire was forced to accept unconditional surrender. Two days later, Sukarno and Muhammad Hatta, the leaders of the Indonesian national movement, proclaimed the independent Republic of Indonesia. Before the war, the Dutch government had been reluctant to recognize the purpose and appeal of the independence movement. As Japan surrendered, the Dutch government in The Hague considered complete restoration of the Dutch Empire imperative as a matter of principle, and for the sake of the economic reconstruction of the impoverished nation in particular. However, the Dutch government had hardly any armed forces at its disposal for this purpose – neither in Asia, nor at home. The first Allied troops to arrive in Indonesia in late August were British troops, occupying small pockets around some of the most important towns: Jakarta, Surabaya, and Semarang (Romijn 2014, 91-102). In late August and September 1945, a broad range of efforts began, providing relief for internees, DPs, and other victims. These efforts were initially conducted by the United Nations' RAPWI (Recovery of Allied Prisoners of War), followed

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<sup>3</sup> <<http://veteranen.indischeharderwijkers.nl/troepentransport.html>> (accessed April 20, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> <<https://www.niod.nl/nl/vraag-en-antwoord>> (accessed September 5, 2019).

by the International, Indonesian, and Dutch East Indies Red Cross Committees (Touwen-Bouwsma and Groen 1996).

Meanwhile, Indonesia was in turmoil. The formation of the new state came with waves of uncontrolled violence, ethnic cleansing (in particular against indigenous Chinese communities), and violence against the Dutch, Eurasians, and indigenous elites. The Republic's provisional government had great difficulty controlling radical militias (Frederick 2014, 133-54). As the first Dutch liaison officers arrived on the scene, they discovered that tens of thousands of European internees were in danger, and therefore in need of evacuation from the embattled colony. In December 1945, the steamers *Oranje* and *Nieuw Amsterdam* brought the first groups of evacuees to Holland. Up to the end of 1948, 110,000 people were evacuated to Holland, of which 4,000 were transported by air (Brocades Zaalberg and Willems 2002, 89-90). The length of the mass evacuation (stretching over three years) was the result, not only of the colonial administration being caught completely off guard by the Indonesian revolution in the first place, but also because they underestimated the viability of the uprising. In fact, the authorities hoped to be able to turn the tide of revolt and delayed the evacuations, assuming that sending large numbers of colonial settlers "back home" would mean loss of face, and could be seen as equal to conceding defeat (Brocades Zaalberg and Willems 2002, 91-2).

Nevertheless, refugees came to Holland in ever increasing numbers, often on overcrowded ships, on which the conditions were quite frugal. People left "in long queues, loaded with suitcases, bags, and packages, shambling over the gangway. A bunch of emigrants. No joy as the ship unmoored, no waving at the quay, no cheers of good-bye" (Bergsma 2010, 4). Their departure was not as festive as in the prewar days, and the migrants had many reasons to complain. At the same time, being able to cope with the situation helped the former internees to strengthen their group identity: sleeping on the ground in a ship's cabin was not that bad, as one of them said: "we had slept worse under the Jap regime" (Bergsma 2010, 4).

Evacuees adapted to the new realities that awaited them at the gradual, relentless pace of the ship. A large majority would not return to the war-torn land they considered to be their home – the postwar world map was changing its colors forever. They were called "repatriates," but those who had lived in the Dutch East Indies for generations had never seen *Patria* (The Homeland). Nevertheless, they had no choice but to settle in Holland – a strange, much impoverished country with a population affected psychologically by its various experiences during World War II. Meanwhile, the same transports used for taking the evacuees out of the danger zones also started bringing soldiers. During the homeward journey, they encountered other ships transporting large contingents of fresh Dutch troops, on their way to the Dutch East Indies – carried over the waves with quite different expectations and outlooks.

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### 3. Recruiting a New Army

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“In the East-Indies, the red-white-and-blue flag is trampled in the mud. Young Frisians, rise in order to raise that flag again and clean it of Japanese stains!” (Kingma 1948, 7). These words summoned members of the resistance in the recently liberated Province of Friesland to volunteer for service overseas. In the wake of the liberation, the Dutch were told that the war at home had come to an end, but was continuing overseas. Supposedly, the people in the Dutch East Indies were as eager for liberation from “Japanese fascism” as the Dutch had been for the end of Nazi occupation. From that point of view, an appeal to the men who had participated in the armed resistance to continue their struggle overseas seemed quite logical. The government urgently needed new recruits, because the “old,” prewar army had been defeated during the five days of war in May 1940, and subsequently disbanded (Romijn 2014, 93-4).

How to put together a new army? In the immediate postwar months, one fifth of the Dutch population were displaced as a result of the war and the oppressive Nazi regime. Among these people were hundreds of thousands of young men, either conscripted for labor in Germany, or in hiding to avoid forced labor. Moreover, registry offices were in disarray, meaning that for the foreseeable future, it would be impossible to effectively draft men of military age. Even if the draft were to be effective, the constitution prohibited the deployment of conscript soldiers overseas. Therefore, the best option at that moment was to call upon the *Binnenlandse Strijdkrachten* (Forces of the Interior); a force created by the exiled government in the summer of 1944 in order to unite all armed resistance (Romijn 2015, 123). These men were promised that they could stay together in local and regional units, under their own commanders – a clear breach of the existing practice of national service, which aimed to promote national cohesion by bringing together and mixing conscripts from all parts of the country (Klinkert 2008, 8-11).

In December 1945, the Dutch government decided to send the first units of “war volunteers” to the Dutch East Indies. After the Japanese defeat, the official purpose for deployment was changed to “restoring peace and order” in the interest of both the Dutch and the Indonesian people. The volunteers were told that “extremist bands” had to be eliminated, not for old-fashioned colonial reasons, but in order to “expand our beneficial rule” all over the Indies (Kingma 1948, 126-8). Significantly, the first division to be sent overseas was called the “7 December Division,” after Queen Wilhelmina’s speech of December 7, 1942. On that occasion, she had promised on behalf of the exiled government to work towards “adjusting” colonial relations to a “more complete partnership” after the war (Foray 2012, 149-62). The first units to depart were collected at Southampton by British troopships and reached the East Indian waters by mid-January 1946.



In the spring of 1946, conscription was reintroduced and implemented, and the practice of sending local or regional battalions of war volunteers was abandoned. The film shown aboard told the men coming from all parts of the Netherlands that they (“the farmer from Frisia, the carpenter from Rotterdam, the miner from Limburg”; NIOD 2009) were part of a national effort to restore order and prosperity overseas. In September 1946, the first draftees were scheduled to be sent overseas. They had received basic training and were allowed two weeks of leave before embarkation. However, this procedure enabled enlisted men to develop second thoughts about the mission and evade embarkation by not reporting and going into hiding (Scagliola 2002, 50-2).

A first batch was scheduled to depart in mid-September 1946, but on the first day of embarkation, 38% did not report (De Jong 2015, 86). The Chief of Staff of the Dutch Army, General Hendrik J. Kruls, spoke by radio to announce that dodgers would be severely prosecuted for desertion under military law (Balts and Gerritsen 1989, 12-3). As a result, the number of dodgers was reduced to about 18% (De Jong 2015, 86-7). Motives for staying away ranged from anti-colonial convictions to private reasons. Anti-colonial attitudes were stimulated by the political opposition to sending an expeditionary force, organized by the Communist Party. In September 1946, the trade union linked to the party organized strikes among the dockworkers in protest, although such sentiments were countered by official propaganda emphasizing the patriotic purpose of the mission (Scagliola 2002, 50-2).

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#### 4. Motivations for Entering the War

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“Our Big Adventure: With the Zeeland Battalion to the Indies” is the title of the history of the deployment of this specific unit of war volunteers, published in 1947 by its chaplain (van der Vrande 1948). In his narrative, as in many stories in this genre, the bold character of the sea voyage was the prelude to a noble exploit in the making. The army underlined this notion by instructing the captains of the troopships to cruise close along points of touristic interest, such as Cape Finisterre, Gibraltar, and Algiers. The majority of volunteers had no experience at all of travelling abroad (or even at home). During the German occupation, many were confined to their own small world and the voyage could be seen as compensation for that. It connected the men to the stories of discovery that were canonized in the popular novels and histories of colonial expansion. Entering the Suez Canal allowed them to experience “the Orient” for the first time, while dealing with floating traders, observing Muslims in prayer, and fully experiencing the tropical heat. Over the years, many soldiers bought cheap still cameras and the pictures they took of the obvious landmarks indicate their collective desire to memorize and share those images (Kok, Somers, and Zweers 2009, 149-62).

The soldiers were educated about the motivation of their mission. Lieutenant-General Simon S. Spoor, the Commander of the Army, in the Dutch East Indies, issued an “An Order of the Day” to all troops on July 21, 1947, telling the men: “you will come as liberators, not as conquerors.”<sup>5</sup> They were lectured (albeit in rather elementary terms) about the colonial society and the respectable accomplishments of the Dutch as beneficial colonizers of Indonesia. The urgency to “restore peace and order” in the colony seemed to be confirmed by meeting the first ships that were homeward bound, carrying the evacuees to the Netherlands. The soldiers had already heard about the hardship of the settlers, and seeing their transports made them even more aware of their own purpose. The army had produced a film under the telling title *Ver van huis* (Far away from home). The film was shown on the troopships as a preparation for their task and advised the fresh recruits to seek guidance from their “brothers in arms of the KNIL, who are experienced jungle-fighters and will teach us their practices and tricks” (NIOD 2009). Later draftees received a booklet called *Scheepspraet* (Ship talk) to inform them in a popular tone about what to expect during the voyage and upon arrival.<sup>6</sup>

The program aboard included military training and exercises, as well as lessons in basic Malay, the lingua franca of the Indonesian Archipelago. There was also space for organized recreation, such as board and card games, cabaret, films, and music. Moreover, the men were expected to participate in keeping the ship clean and, among others, were also expected to perform kitchen duties.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, significant attention was paid to the observation of religious duties, thus connecting them to the values of home. This also allowed the chaplains of the different denominations to get acquainted with the men and share their concerns. All in all, the journey was used to foster a common sense of purpose, as well as group identity and cohesion. “A job had to be done,” and the men were expected to be up to it (Romijn 2014, 106). A folkloristic highlight would occur while crossing the equator, in the Indian Ocean, as Neptune, the God of the Seas, and some helper would “come aboard” and “baptize” the newcomers, using lots of shaving cream and soap. They would be handed a certificate bearing their name, stating that they had crossed the equator and were promised a safe journey, including – and this was what the men really wanted to hear – a safe return home.

In late 1945, the first troops approached the Dutch East Indies. The allied headquarters did not allow them to disembark in Java, for fear of adding fuel to the revolutionary fire. As the Zealand Battalion arrived in the Indonesian waters on the RMS *Alcantara*, the British military authorities instructed that the

<sup>5</sup> Simon S. Spoor, “Order of the Day,” July 21, 1947 in: file nr. 3741, inventory nr. 2.10.14, National Archives of the Netherlands (below: NA), The Hague.

<sup>6</sup> <[www.zevendecemberdivisie.nl/diary7.html](http://www.zevendecemberdivisie.nl/diary7.html)> (accessed May 4, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> <[www.veteranen.indischehardewijkers.nl/troepentransport.html](http://www.veteranen.indischehardewijkers.nl/troepentransport.html)> (accessed April 20, 2018).

Dutch troops should disembark in British Malaya. Out of sheer frustration, the men sang the German war song “Denn wir fahren gegen England” (“That’s why we’re sailing against England”) upon hearing the news (van der Vrande 1948, 77-8). Another British transport, *Stirling Castle*, continued the trip to Sydney, as it also carried Australian soldiers on their home journey from Britain. While in port, Australian unionists organized protests against the Dutch intentions to recolonize Indonesia. As tensions ran high, the soldiers aboard countered the abuse from the quays by singing the Dutch national anthem. After nine days of animosity, they were taken by the Australian vessel *Moreton Bay* and transported to Java (Lagendijk 1991, 51-2). In the course of 1946, Australian dockworkers showed their solidarity with Indonesian independence by boycotting Dutch ships and refusing to deliver coal (Lagendijk 1991, 4). Together these episodes illustrate the vulnerable international position of the Netherlands at that time.

In late March 1946, the war volunteers were finally allowed ashore in the Indonesian ports under Allied control, the most important being Tanjung Priok, situated near the present-day Indonesian capital, Jakarta (known as Batavia by the Dutch colonial rulers). Their arrival was part of an armed conflict that was to last until the end of 1949. The war of independence consisted of irregular warfare, as well as large-scale military operations, punctuated throughout with various political and diplomatic negotiations. The official Dutch framing of the war was as a “police action” to curb internal unrest, as they had during prewar colonial times. From the Indonesian perspective, the war was a national revolution and part of the process of building their newly conceived nation-state. In the course of the war, the Dutch war goals changed from fighting the Japanese, to restoring Dutch rule and “law and order,” then to suppressing political “extremism” (a term used to brand those Indonesians willing to continue their fight for freedom), and ultimately to supporting the position of the Dutch politicians at the negotiating table (Romijn 2014, 101).

A total of approximately 120,000 soldiers were transported to the Dutch East Indies in order to join forces with the colonial army (numbering 80,000 men at its height), in addition to a marine brigade, and units of the Dutch Royal Navy and the Air Force (Romijn 2014, 94). Upon arrival, the men generally did not know how long their tour of duty would be; the time was to be adjusted according to military necessity, and in many cases, this meant at least two or three years. This protracted uncertainty was one of the reasons for demoralization and exhaustion, in addition to the climate and the general living conditions, and the nature of the conflict. The war was violent and cruel on both sides. Indeed, a detailed analysis by the historian Rémy Limpach (2016, 737-40) has established that the Dutch armed forces systematically engaged in war crimes and other transgressions of international military and humanitarian law.

In late December 1948, the Dutch government decided to make one more effort to crush the Indonesian Republic by launching a large-scale military offen-

sive. Despite military success, the endeavor misfired politically, as the United Nations Security Council forced the Dutch back to the negotiating table, while the Indonesian armed forces turned to full-scale guerrilla warfare. After four years, the Dutch were forced to negotiate an end to the conflict and gave up their claims of sovereignty in Indonesia. The soldiers and their units, now suffering from mission creep, simply wanted to go home. As their comrades fell, they wondered what the purpose was. Finally, it was decided that the 6,000 fallen Dutch soldiers would not return home, for the tropical climate made swift burial imperative and the shipping capacity was insufficient anyway. Hence, they were buried in military “cemeteries of honor” and their comrades took it upon themselves to take photographs and to send them home to the relatives (for examples, see Kok, Somers, and Zweers 2009, 156-7).

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## 5. Homeward Bound

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So, how did the experience of war affect the spirit and mentality of the Dutch soldiers? Would they be able to successfully reintegrate into civilian life without raising social tensions now their mission overseas had come to an end? After all, in their absence, peacetime Dutch society had engaged in an effort of reconstruction requiring a large degree of civic discipline (Blom 1981). What was to be expected of the men who had been hardened by years of fighting, which had stimulated both their good properties and bad inclinations? At home in the Netherlands, concerned officials agreed that these matters ought to be managed with care. In October 1947, the Dutch Federation for National Mental Health organized a conference to discuss what problems the men might encounter (and cause) when changing their battledresses for civil suits. Experts from different disciplines – military psychologists, officers charged with preparations for demobilization, and military clergy – discussed policies for reintegrating the first units of war volunteers who were approaching the end of their tour of duty.<sup>8</sup>

Significantly, the reintegration into family and social life was primarily addressed from a religious perspective. The Roman Catholic chief chaplain addressed the state of mind of the soldiers in the most optimistic terms. During his own service as a battalion chaplain, he had noticed how they had enjoyed the prevailing spirit of boldness and aggressiveness more than the sensitivities, petty rules, and duties of civilian life. “Military service brought them closer to the male primordial instincts, made them a bit more course and wilder, alt-

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<sup>8</sup> Legervoortlichtingsdienst [Public Relations Service of the Dutch Army] 1947. “*Demobilisatiedag van de Nationale Federatie voor de Geestelijke Volksgezondheid*” [National Federation of Mental Health Care], Report of a conference held in Utrecht, 30 October 1947, Collection NIOD Amsterdam.

though not in a psychopathic sense.”<sup>9</sup> These men were supposedly longing to return to family life – their parents, girlfriends, and trusted social networks. At the same time, however, they were expected to rebel against a strictly regulated civilian life, civil servants bureaucratically ruling their opportunities, and a general lack of freedom. How should the Netherlands accommodate “the best soldiers in the world”; “the best and most useful human resource that our Fatherland, and indeed, the world at large had available”?<sup>10</sup>

The expectation of such a large number of returning soldiers was seen as a potential threat to social stability. The key to their successful reintegration was, according to the experts, simple and elementary: reunite them with their families. In this respect, the female side of this gendered narrative was portrayed as instrumental. Their mothers were expected to “work wonders,” fully understanding their sons and guiding them through the moral and social quagmires that they might encounter returning from a brutal war on the other side of the world. Their mothers were also expected to make them feel at home again, and to reconnect them to religious and community life. However, other issues were more material in nature – most importantly to help them secure jobs and housing in order to start a family. The thinking was that if these men were able to fully participate in society, they would simultaneously revitalize Dutch society with the same energy they had displayed during service. To make this possible, a Protestant navy chaplain argued, the issue of reintegration should be turned around: “would Dutch society, having become petty-bourgeois and narrow-minded again after the German occupation, be able to adapt to the pick of Dutch males?”<sup>11</sup>

After the settlement of the conflict was finally negotiated, the formal transfer of sovereignty took place on December 29, 1949. As a consequence, the soldiers had to be repatriated in a relatively short period of time (Meurs 2010). However, the transport capacity that Dutch companies had at their disposal was utterly insufficient to repatriate the remaining 75,000 men. For this reason, the government decided to charter foreign shipping space, in particular from the US government. Thus, twelve American ships were used, which had been built during the war for transporting men, arms, and equipment to the different theatres of war. In the postwar period, they had been chartered by the IRO, and had brought large numbers of DPs from Europe to the Americas and Australia.

The USS *General S. D. Sturgis*, for instance, had been launched in 1943, and had seen plenty of action in the Pacific, also carrying troops to the invasion front in France. After the end of World War II, the ship made 21 voyages, bringing tens of thousands of DPs from Bremerhaven in Germany to the United States. After carrying civilian refugees from Germany to Australia in late 1949

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<sup>9</sup> Legervoorlichtingsdienst, Report of Conference 30 October 1947, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Legervoorlichtingsdienst, Report of Conference 30 October 1947, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Legervoorlichtingsdienst, Report of Conference 30 October 1947, 15.

and early 1950, the ship picked up Dutch soldiers on their homeward journey. Subsequently, the vessel transported troops from different European countries to Korea. Thus, international networks of mass transport came into existence in order to deal with the multifaceted legacies of World War II. For example, the Dutch steamer *Johan de Witt* carried units of the French Foreign Legion to Saigon, subsequently picking up Dutch soldiers on their homeward journey.<sup>12</sup> Other Dutch troops would meet transports of French troops to Indochina while at sea. Ironically, those who had lost a colonial war crossed paths with those who were on their way to face the same fate. An important colonial postscript was the transport of 4,000 Moluccan KNIL personnel and their families (in total 12,000 persons) to the Netherlands between 1950 and 1951. The Netherlands did not recognize the Republic of the South Moluccas, which had been founded in 1950, and in fact had seceded from independent Indonesia. The men embarked as soldiers in Dutch military service, but were perfidiously tricked into compulsory “demobilization” before debarkation in the Netherlands. Uprooted and treated as *de facto* DPs, they were put into camps, where they remained for years to come – integration was not the official purpose (Bosscher and Waaldijk 1985, 53-60; Smeets and Steijlen 2006).

The homeward journey of the expeditionary force generally started at one of the main ports in Indonesia. In Tanjung Priok, brief ceremonies were held. Upon departure, the “Wilhelmus” – the Dutch national anthem – would be played, rather than the Indonesian anthem, and if American shipping was used, “The Star-Spangled Banner” was played. Often, representatives of the military authorities came to the quays to take leave of the men and address them. If not, the men felt frustrated, and confirmed in their conviction that the authorities did not care about them anymore since the war had come to such an unfortunate end.<sup>13</sup> One day in early 1950, General Dirk Buurman van Vreeden, the Army Commander at the time, was booed by the embarking men when he told them that the time was near to change their military uniforms for the blue or white collars that the nation would need to continue postwar reconstruction (Lagendijk 1991, 19-20). This was not exactly what the men wanted to hear from their commander, as he suggested by implication that they should forget about the lost war. Even worse, this fed their concerns about finding gainful employment upon return. On one occasion, as the Indonesian longshoremen were on strike, the Indonesian authorities saved the day by deploying their own soldiers to load the ships; a strange but efficient way for both sides to say farewell to former enemies.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS\\_General\\_S.D.\\_Sturgis\\_\(AP-137\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_General_S.D._Sturgis_(AP-137))> (accessed April 22, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> “Reports of Journeys Tandjong Priok-Amsterdam,” May 1950, file nr. 47 (MV General Hersey), NA, The Hague, 2.13.103.

<sup>14</sup> “Reports of Journeys Tandjong Priok-Amsterdam,” April 27, 1950, file nr. 48 (MV General Howze), NA, The Hague, 2.13.103.

From a practical point of view, the homeward journey was intended to mirror the onward voyage. The men were under “commanding officer troops,” assisted by some 15 staff members responsible for administrative duties, provisions, medical care, and also including chaplains, a film-projectionist, and an officer charged with preparing demobilization. The commanding officer had the responsibility for the troops aboard and was to liaise with the captain of the ship if problems arose. During the voyage military discipline was maintained, and the officers and other ranks were largely separated – more so than had been the case on the onward trip. One report explicitly mentions how, as soon as the troops had been embarked, many officers would behave like individual passengers and loose interest in their men.<sup>15</sup>

The non-commissioned soldiers were told that they were not travelling by luxury liner, as some were expecting on hearing that they would be taken home by US ships.<sup>16</sup> In this respect, they were betrayed. The vessels of the “generals class” were equipped and chartered by international organizations and governments for transporting DPs *en masse*. Accordingly, the accommodation and other arrangements were quite basic, if not harsh. The logistics aboard the ship were founded on the principle that the evacuated DPs would be required to perform most “household” chores themselves. They even had to sign a statement that they were prepared to do so before leaving. This principle made it possible to limit the number of crew to a bare minimum. The American crew treated the soldiers as they had the DPs and required them to do all chores, including ship cleaning and kitchen duties. One troop commander noted in his report that the crew had told the soldiers to use their toothbrush for polishing the tiles in the showers – to which he added indignantly that this reminded him “of practices in Bergen-Belsen and Dachau.”<sup>17</sup>

On the onward journey, such duties aboard had been an instrument of maintaining group coherence. Now they took a toll on the mood of the men, in particular because the attitude of the American crew clashed with their self-image as weathered soldiers. The soldiers felt treated like servants and felt looked down upon with a certain disdain. In one case, the crew assumed their passengers were in fact recently released prisoners of war of the Indonesian forces.<sup>18</sup> When asked why the ship’s crew did not engage in regular household duties themselves, a ship’s captain answered the troop commander: “No Sir, they are white men and in America they are not used to do such kind of work: that’s for

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<sup>15</sup> “Reports of Journeys Tandjong Priok-Amsterdam,” May 22, 1950, file nr. 47 (MV General Hersey), NA, The Hague, 2.13.103.

<sup>16</sup> “Reports of Journeys Tandjong Priok-Amsterdam,” April 27, 1950, file nr. 48 (MV General Howze), NA, The Hague, 2.13.103.

<sup>17</sup> “Reports of Journeys Tandjong Priok-Amsterdam,” May 31, 1950, file nr. 47 (MV General Hersey), NA, The Hague, 2.13.103.

<sup>18</sup> “Reports of Journeys Tandjong Priok-Amsterdam,” May 26, 1950, file nr. 46 (MV General Sturgis), NA, The Hague, 2.13.103.

the colored people.”<sup>19</sup> The returning soldiers’ feelings in this respect were ambiguous. On one hand, they felt insulted by being “degraded” to that status, while on the other hand, they took offence because they did not want to see themselves as racists. In a way, they kept to the colonial outlook that they had fought in the interest of the Indonesian people. The Dutch commanding officers tried to use diplomacy in order to pacify the relationship with their American counterparts, but daily contact often remained “awkward” and “unpleasant.”<sup>20</sup>

If diplomacy might work to improve cooperation between crew and passengers, the other conditions aboard the ships were less subject to change. According to many reports, the ships were “completely unfit” for transporting troops, in particular for lack of privacy, if women and children had joined the officers repatriating (Leidelsemeijer 2001, 203-28). There were many sources of tension at hand. Lodging was bad: the ships were occupied by twice as many passengers as on the onward journey, roughly 3,000 instead of 1,500. The sleeping quarters of the other ranks were in the holds of the ship, and consisted of hammocks in long rows, four layers high, without any privacy. Even worse was the intense heat during the first stretch of the voyage to the Suez Canal (35° C. below deck) and deficient (or non-existent) air conditioning in those spaces. Soldiers preferred to sleep on deck, but as a rule this was discouraged, and there was a general lack of space. During the daytime, the steel decks grew hot and unbearable to touch. Seating on chairs and banks was hardly available, so the men were supposed to walk around. In one case, a captain offered an embarrassed troop commander the use of some rubber clubs to stop the men from leaning on the railings.<sup>21</sup>

Food was another problem. The ships’ provisions were not wholly compatible with the taste and appetite of the passengers. All meals provided were according to American Army standards, however, the Dutch soldiers were used to different food and larger portions. While the officers were quite satisfied with their diet, complaints would pour from the other ranks. On the *General Sturgis*, a riot occurred when the dissatisfied soldiers loudly complained about the meagre meals, shouting “Hunger!” They received support from a Protestant chaplain, who used the ship’s intercom system to underline that “We do not tolerate this!” The chaplain was reprimanded as the troop commander and his staff discussed the matter with the captain. The latter told his counterpart that the authorities should have notified him of the “great potato-preference” of the Dutch. One of the officers reported that the “*stomachus germanus*” (“Germanic

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<sup>19</sup> “Reports of Journeys Tandjong Priok-Amsterdam,” May 22, 1950, file nr. 47 (MV General Hersey), NA, The Hague, 2.13.103.

<sup>20</sup> “Reports of Journeys Tandjong Priok-Amsterdam,” May 17, 1950, file nr. 49 (MV General Sturgis), NA, The Hague, 2.13.103.

<sup>21</sup> “Reports of Journeys Tandjong Priok-Amsterdam,” May 1950 31, file nr. 47 (MV General Hersey), NA, The Hague, 2.13.103.



stomach”) was insufficiently served by the kitchens. Providing extra bread with the hot meals gave some relief, but dissatisfaction remained.<sup>22</sup>

Ironically, at the same time as the homeward-bound Dutch soldiers claimed their daily subsistence level of potatoes, the civil evacuees from the Dutch East Indies would be more or less compelled by social workers to integrate into the Dutch “food identity” and replace rice in their diets with potatoes. The idea was that potatoes would help them to remain strong in the cold Dutch climate. More generally, this reflected the widespread refusal of Dutch society to accept the characteristic properties of these new arrivals and the persistent urge to “completely integrate” – in the Dutch context – a related yet strange society (Bosma, Raben, and Willems 2006, 190-208).

Despite the setbacks in the mood on the troopships, most reports made an effort to underline that the general mood and behavior of the troops were good, very good, or even excellent. In some cases, however, the attitude of the troops was considered “less favorable.”<sup>23</sup> Some of the men had difficulty accepting authority following their experiences during their service, and thus behaved as if they had already been demobilized. Uncertainty about the future influenced their behavior. The men who had come as citizens to be further socialized in military life and war were now preparing to change their uniforms for civilian attire. Notwithstanding, the returning soldiers displayed more optimism than the small number of repatriating civilians aboard.<sup>24</sup> Obviously, the first category might expect their social network to be supportive, whereas for the second, uncertainty prevailed. As a matter of fact, nothing in the reports indicates that the returning troops were discussing the rationale of their deployment or the traumatic experiences that had come with it. Possibly, they had ample opportunity to find the expressions and attitudes to do so during their mission.

During the voyage, according to the shipping reports, daily life was filled by preparations for returning to civilian life, and also by keeping the men busy in order to prevent boredom, and hence, still more dissatisfaction. The clergy held daily services, in many cases on the decks because of the lack of space below decks. Reports by the chaplains and ministers on the mood of the men during the homeward journey are varied. Some indicate the great interest the men were taking in attending services and, in the case of Roman Catholics, coming to do confession, while others reported dwindling participation, saying that they now had ample opportunity to talk man-to-man.<sup>25</sup> Thus, right up to the end

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<sup>22</sup> “Reports of Journeys Tandjong Priok-Amsterdam,” May 22, 1950, file nr. 47 (MV General Hersey), NA, The Hague, 2.13.103.

<sup>23</sup> “Reports of Journeys Tandjong Priok-Amsterdam,” May 22, 1950, file nr. 47 (MV General Hersey), NA, The Hague, 2.13.103.

<sup>24</sup> “Reports of Journeys Tandjong Priok-Amsterdam,” May 17, 1950, file nr. 49 (MV General Sturgis), NA, The Hague, 2.13.103.

<sup>25</sup> “Reports of Journeys Tandjong Priok-Amsterdam,” May 31, 1950, file nr. 47 (MV General Hersey), NA, The Hague, 2.13.103.

of their deployment, it remained the role of the chaplains to care for the spiritual well-being of the men by connecting them to the trusted values of home. With an eye on the near future, Protestant as well as Catholic clergy handed out brochures on the principles of Christian marriage, as preparation for the role of a well-disciplined husband and father. At the same time, the men had to undergo surprise checks for venereal diseases while still aboard.

Diversions were offered by showing movies and playing music – if projectors and turntables were available. In cases of sports events at home, in particular international football matches, the broadcasts of the Dutch World Service were relayed by the ship's radio. Returning singers, musicians, and cabaret artists who had been on tour among the troops played for all aboard the ship, even though they often had but one program on offer. Welfare officials and volunteers organized quizzes (*"hersengymnastiek"* [mental gymnastics]) and lectures on general topics, handed out board games (*"Stratego is very popular now among the men"*),<sup>26</sup> or ran a library. Obviously, the main aspect that curbed dissatisfaction about the difficult conditions on the ships was the prospect of returning home, helped by the gradual moderation of weather conditions. Upon reaching the Suez Canal, the men changed their tropical attire for regular clothing – another symbolic step on the journey home.

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## 7. Back Home

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Preparations for returning and reintegrating into society had been made with care. These were the responsibility of a "demobilization information officer" aboard the ships. They organized lectures – obligatory for all to attend – about opportunities for professional training, advised the men which jobs were available (police, construction workers, etc.), and those which were already occupied (postal service, automotive mechanics). They also discussed the opportunities for emigration, in particular to the United States and Canada, as well as to Australia. They showed educational movies called *Thuis* (Back Home) and *Aan de Slag!* (Get to work!).<sup>27</sup> The tone of these movies was very much leaning on the omnipresent rhetoric of engaging in the reconstruction of the nation, vaguely suggesting that the men had spent their years overseas in idleness. In the background, of course, a general concern about the economic impact of the "loss" of the colony dominated.

Upon arrival in one of the Dutch ports, official welcome ceremonies were held. Family members and friends had been notified by mail, sent upon depar-

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<sup>26</sup> "Reports of Journeys Tandjong Priok-Amsterdam," May 31, 1950, file nr. 47 (MV General Hersey), NA, The Hague, 2.13.103.

<sup>27</sup> "Reports of Journeys Tandjong Priok-Amsterdam," April 27, 1950, file nr. 48 (MV General Howze), NA, The Hague, 2.13.103

ture or from Port Said, or by telegram from the ship, if the men could spare the money. If possible, they would be at the quay, or even at the Hook of Holland or IJmuiden, the entrances to the ports of Rotterdam and Amsterdam. While docking, the national anthem was played, speeches were given, and finally the men could disembark. Those not collected by relatives were guided towards buses, taking them to the different provinces and towns from which they came. Some were greeted with street parties and received presents – the typical present would be a bicycle (new or secondhand, but always very practical). Others slipped silently through the backdoors of their parents' houses, returning to basic civilian life with little or no fanfare. After a short period of disembarkation leave, the men were called once again to the military demobilization centers, where they were administratively turned into civilians. The grateful nation attributed the men a "Medal of Order and Peace" to recognize their service. Some received it ceremoniously, however, most did so by mail. They were civilians once again, albeit civilians with a story: they were veterans now.

The reintegration of the fictitious soldier Lodewijk Stegman was maliciously narrated as a hilarious failure by his creator, Willem Frederik Hermans. The novelist demonstrated his protagonist's maladjusted attitude by having him found a national football pool (in reality strictly forbidden at the time), covered up as a maverick political party. In historical reality, a large majority of the returning soldiers seemed to have done much better, at least from the perspective of the authorities, clergy, and psychiatrists who cared for them. They rapidly adapted to a civilian life that had been on hold for years – first having been drafted for compulsory labor in Germany during the occupation; then departing to do so or gone in hiding; perhaps joining the resistance; and then, following the end of World War II, enlisting once again, this time for service overseas. Many had missed parts of their formal education, as well as career opportunities, and thus were eager to make up for lost time, visiting evening schools to get the required diplomas. The urge to marry, start a family, and find a place to live in a country in which housing had become extremely scarce, took a lot of energy. Reintegration in society was hard work and required stamina. Working towards that purpose disciplined the former soldiers now as civilians.

Thus, I would suggest that their experiences of integration in civil life clearly displays parallels with those of the post-colonial migrants and refugees. Another parallel is that their stories did not fit in with the dominant Dutch narrative about World War II, highlighting the heroic struggle of the nation against Nazi oppression. This provided the founding myth of the restored nation-state, which also served as a mental compensation for the "loss" of empire. Moreover, the Netherlands had not yet developed a veterans' tradition. After their return, the former soldiers tended to keep the war at a distance, not sharing their memories with outsiders, often not even with their own families. If they shared memories at all, they highlighted the adventure and reminisced about the exotic features of life in the Dutch East Indies; a land they would still

refer to by its colonial name of “*Indië*.” They had their photograph albums and their typical souvenirs: batik cloths, carved woodwork, chiseled copper- and silverware. These very clichés testify to the fact that they had been “there,” and in fact, that they had fulfilled their rites of passage and had gone through a transformation: from civilians to soldiers with a mission in a different world and back again. A characteristic of colonial wars is that they put actual warfare at a distance: those who participate and travel that distance undergo a metamorphosis, while those who stay behind remain who they are and thus, from the soldiers’ point of view, never understand.

Yet only two decades later, the war was to overtake them again when, in 1969, Dutch war crimes were addressed on national television. This renewed interest was met with an outcry from the veterans, who felt uncomfortable as their wartime experiences were stirred up and suspicion about their behavior was raised once more in public. What was even worse from their point of view was the way in which their exploits were criticized in the intimacy of their own living rooms by means of the invasive mass medium of television. What had been portrayed on the onward journey as a “big adventure” now became a massive crime scene. At the same time, however, some former soldiers stated that atrocities had happened and not only that, but much more often than people knew (Scagliola 2002, 105-29). More research into the early postwar decades is required to understand the ways in which the soldiers mentally processed their long tour of duty in Indonesia.

All in all, for this generation of men, the sea voyages they undertook had a profound formative impact on interpreting and framing the purpose of the military mission of recolonization. The onward voyage built on preexisting notions of beneficial colonial rule. It confined the men in a common space, molding their spirits via a well-considered program of training, education, and leisure. The touristic features that gradually moved them to the tropics and the duration of the voyage further forged a degree of common understanding and group cohesion. The men were constantly looking towards the horizon, and actually beyond it, while at the same time, their “horizon of expectation,” to borrow Reinhart Koselleck’s (2014, 11) expression, was narrowed down to prepare them for “the job to be done.” This implied looking away from occurrences of transgressive violence: for better or for worse, it was “a job” (Romijn 2014, 91). Conversely, when returning home, they had seen enough of the horizon, and focused instead on returning to a civilian life, albeit one in which their horizon of expectation was often quite blurred. How would they find their families and girlfriends? What opportunities would they find for building a professional life, finding a house, starting a family? Would they be forced to emigrate by lack of opportunities, and thus be compelled to make another intercontinental sea voyage?

For many of the soldiers, the distance and the time required to travel to and from the war had a psychological impact. In the first place, like all things colo-

nial, and wars in particular, matters were confined to areas far away, out of sight of the metropole. Inevitably, this caused alienation between the nation and its fighting representatives; between the soldiers and the political elites that bore responsibility for conducting the war; and also between the soldiers and their social environment, including their loved ones. In armed conflict, the soldiers experienced and accepted that civilians can never understand what it is to experience warfare (Fussel 1989, 267). The mental distance grew congruent with the physical distance. The onward voyage can thus be seen as a rite of passage in order to enter the realm of conflict. The return voyage was a way of “deprogramming” the military mind, in which the experience of being transported like DPs and refugees was an extra stimulus for the process of “sobering up.” Ironically, the soldiers were tempted to consider these parallel experiences as degrading their military status. Nevertheless, the return voyage may have helped the men to forge a group identity as returning soldiers, and to produce the stories of their deployment that would enable them to cope with the experiences of their deployment as civilians-to-be – for the time being at least.

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